

Archives of Surgical Research | Syed Zafar Haider Memorial Feature

Syed Zafar Haider: Custodian of a Tradition, A Class Act

Tehseen Ahmed Cheema

My association with Sayyed Zafar Haider spans almost half a century.

ذہن بات کی برس چار دوہے، قصہ کا صدی نصف

I feel particularly fortunate that in all those years he enriched my life with his kindness, mentorship and role modeling. I was admitted in Nishtar Medical College in 1967. Coming from the backwaters of the remotest district of Punjab, Rahim Yar Khan, his influence has guided my professional and intellectual growth in many subtle and obvious ways. Shah Ji, as SZH was affectionately called by his disciples, has transformed lives of countless students and residents who were fortunate enough to be touched by him.

KEYWORDS Mentorship, surgery, teaching and learning, role modeling

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SZH Memorial Feature

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Those were the watershed years in the history of Nishtar as well as for the country. The old traditions were crumbling and a new era of disorder was ushering in. The year was 1969. It was first ever student's strike in the history of Nishtar against the perceived strict rules being enforced in the hostels and the target was personality of the great incomparable teacher of physiology Prof. Gulzar Sahib who happened to be the hostel warden as well. Protesting students were gathered in the entry hall of the hospital and the mob was almost uncontrollable. No professor was ready to face the rebellious crowd. That was the first time we experienced the magic of great orator at a crucial moment. SZH, directly from operating room, clad in his operation room gown, descended from the stairs, and without any apprehension walked into the crowd and swayed them away from their violent course with his powerful and emotional appeal, invoking the tradition, history and values of Nishtar and the medical profession. For next couple of years whole country but especially Nishtar was gripped in the hysteria right/left politics, change of guard from Ayub to Yahya, rise of Bhutto cult, tragedy of East Pakistan and its aftermaths - a real time of chaos and change. To us Shah Ji provided a firm anchor of hope, steadfastness, and commitment to values with love of Pakistan above any other consideration. He was very opinionated about certain personalities but his faith in Pakistan, in Islam as its *raison d'être* was unshakable. Though he never interfered in student's politics directly, but his influence in upholding of tradition and in propriety in conduct, both for students and faculty was undeniable.



SZH was the chief guest and keynote speaker at the inaugural session of Pakistan Society for Surgery of the Hand in November 1993 at Bahawalpur but like a perpetual student, he listens to every presentation with utmost attention.



As the keynote speaker, he delivered the most memorable lecture on history of surgery in Pakistan.

As a teacher and a surgeon, his hard work and commitment was subject of folklore and stories students transmitted from generation to generation. His lectures were attended not just for their high level of scientific information but for oratory, drama and performance. He was master of eloquence in any language he chose to express himself – English, Urdu, or Punjabi with appropriately inserted verses of classical poets and quotes from icons of medical history. I haven't come across a more effective class room lecturer in medical field. It was not the era of video recording and I regret that those performances of SZH could not be saved for the progeny. However, the most feared part of his presence was unpredictability of his persona which could shift from father like kindness to a formidable disciplinarian, showing him visibly upset about something minor, sometimes without warning and a notice. Looking back, I recall that this created an unstated demand of excellence because no one wanted to disappoint Shah Ji. His ward was considered a showpiece of cleanliness, patient-centered care and high-quality teaching. Any delegates from outside who came to visit Nishtar, their first stop was Shah Ji's ward, and they were duly impressed by the standard of care patients were receiving.



My ward batch with SZH. Under his influence, this group produces two psychiatrists, two ENT surgeons, one Ophthalmologist, one Dermatologist, one Pediatrician, one Pulmonologist and an Orthopedic surgeon

In my final year, I had a serious injury to my foot (Lisfranc fracture-dislocation) in a student versus police clash. The way SZH protected me from the police and earned displeasure of the authorities, I can recall only with great gratitude. For him, his students were more precious than the goodwill of powerfuls in the government. Those were the years when academic sessions were indeterminately prolonged due to unrest in the country and in the student community. Our final examination was postponed for six months. Shah Ji allowed few of us to become his house surgeons even before the examination and the final result. That turned out to be the fateful event for me and a surgical career became my destiny. Shah Ji was the inspiring force to set me on this course and remained a guiding light for rest

of my career. Like a true mentor, he remained interested in my career, followed my professional trajectory and took a genuine pride in my success and achievements.

He visited me in 1979 during my chief year as orthopedic resident at New Jersey University of Medicine and Dentistry. On my request, he attended one of our grand-round conferences. The whole crowd fell under the spell of his graceful personality and eloquence. That elevated my stature in the eyes of my colleagues and program director by many notches.

In 1993, Pakistan Society for Surgery of the Hand (PSSH) was formed and I was elected its founding president. SZH was requested to be the chief guest and the keynote speaker at the inaugural session of the first meeting of PSSH. He delivered a most memorable lecture on history of surgery in Pakistan for which he had been a witness and an important protagonist in its forming years.

An essential part of my sojourns in Pakistan during all my years in US, was a pilgrimage stop at his residence to pay tribute, express gratitude and ask for his blessing and prayers. He always gave me gift of a book with his autographs and inspiring remark. Those are still my treasured collections. Once, one was able to penetrate outer crust of his persona, he was an unusually simple and kind man, seeking pleasures in small things of life like taking a walk or gardening. I actually saw him talking to the plants like his friends.



My truncated house job with SZH

On the fateful morning of February 18th, 2013, I was watching TV and braking news flashed that an eye surgeon in Lahore had been gunned down with his son in a sectarian target killing. My heart sank, as I knew the only eye surgeon in Lahore who could be target for such a heinous crime. Hoping it be false somehow, I called Dr. Shrafat Hussain Bhutta to confirm. The dread was confirmed and I was shattered with this most senseless act against a most noble person who was nothing but a benefactor of the humanity. For many days, I could not gather the courage to visit Shah Ji and share his grief. When finally, I had the

chance, I sat close to him on the ground. He embraced me and we both cried without uttering a word. The grief of losing the only son and a grandson was unbearable but SZH was still an example of grace and forbearance. I wondered how he was able to hold himself together in the face of such a tragedy. It dawned on me that he is and always has been custodian of a tradition – tradition of dignity of a teacher, tradition of duty of a healer, tradition of values, and as a last act custodian of the tradition of grace and patience under the most pressing circumstances like his forbearers. He always did this as a duty and always with a class act. May God bless his soul and reward him for the "sdaq i jaria" he left in the form of his students. He will remain a role model for generations of medical students as a teacher and as a human being. He is gone but long shadow lingers on.

لالہ جوں مری سے تربت گے نہ کل میں دل داغ

گے ہوں پ نہاں میں خاک جو نہ ہیں اخگر وہ یہ

TA Cheema